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SUBJECT: MALIAN PRESS COVERAGE OF DEATH OF ALLEGED AQIM
SUSPECT

1.(SBU) Several Malian newspapers have published articles covering the February 26 automobile accident that killed four members of the Malian State Security (DGSE) and one suspected member of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). The accident occurred while the DGSE was transferring two Mauritanian nationals and suspected AQIM members, both arrested in September 2008, from Gao to Bamako. The Mauritanian prisoner succumbed to his injuries a few days after the accident. On March 10 the Malian newspaper Le Republicain wondered if the death of the suspected terrorist could hinder efforts to secure the release of the hostages currently held by Moctar bel Moctar and AQIM. Le Republicain also reported that the Mauritanian suspect's family as well as an unnamed Mauritanian human rights association had demanded an official autopsy and investigation of the accident's circumstances.

2.(SBU) On March 17, under the headline "Accident or Act of Sabotage?", Le Republicain described the transfer operation as "badly planned, badly prepared, and badly executed" and reported that colleagues of the dead DGSE officers were pinning responsibility for the accident on DGSE senior leadership. Le Republicain article said unnamed DGSE officers questioned why six DGSE agents were ordered to transfer two suspected AQIM prisoners from Gao to Bamako - a 14 hour drive - in one Dodge Dakota double-cabin pick-up. The article said the vehicle had previously been loaned to a former rebel leader in northern Mali and had only been returned to the DGSE a day before. The DGSE officials believed that, given the sensitivity of the mission, Mali should have provided two vehicles or air transport. According to Le Republicain, the five people killed in the accident were all sitting in the bed of the pick-up truck. Asserting that the accident was caused by the loss of one of the vehicle's wheels at high speed, Le Republicain raised the possibility of sabotage and asked whether the vehicle had been properly inspected and secured prior to its departure from Gao.

3.(SBU) An earlier article run by Le Quotidien de Bamako reported that the Malian government's official explanation of the accident had convinced few people in the town of Kati, where the DGSE officers were based. According to the paper, the parents of the victims were denied access to their sons' remains, and the government had not, as of March 2, opened an investigation into the cause of the accident.

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